

ARTS IN EDUCATION

An elevator speech on Visual Thinking Strategies

By Sondra Hines
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I was asked a few weeks ago to prepare an elevator speech explaining Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to someone who knows nothing about it. Realizing that not many people know anything about VTS, I imagined stepping onto an elevator in Helena. No, — let's put the elevator in San Diego — it's much warmer there in March.

A friendly person on the elevator with me (noticing my pasty white winter complexion, I'm sure) asks where I'm visiting from. I explain that I'm in town from Montana for a training in Visual Thinking Strategies. "Oh, what's that?" she says.

I ask her to imagine a group of third graders who are looking at a carefully selected sculpture and sharing ideas about "what is going on with" the large figure. The docent leading this tour asks, "What do you see that makes you say that?" and off they go.

Each comment leads to another and the students are supporting their thoughts and ideas with visual evidence from the artwork. "I think he might be watching animals!" "He looks like he's sitting on a rock and is very quiet."

One student disagrees with this comment and explains why. "I think he's an explorer, because he's carrying binoculars and his face looks inquisitive." Inquisitive!! He actually said inquisitive!

The docent facilitating the discussion responds by paraphrasing each response and asking the group "What more can we find?"

The atmosphere is electric and hands are flying up as others see something else or think



Docent employs Visual Thinking Strategies while working with students at the Holter Museum of Art.

(Photo by Sondra Hines)

of something in a different way. Students are energized and engaged through critical thinking and discussion. The teacher is excited because of the amazing ideas that are being shared and the docent is excited because art is the object that is bringing it all together.

After an interaction like this we often hear comments such as, "I couldn't believe what the students were coming up with," and "I've looked at that piece of artwork a dozen times and I never thought of it in that way," or "Their thinking was so creative and sometimes profound."

These reactions are what motivate our staff and docents to be effective facilitators of Visual Thinking Strategy discussions. It takes a significant commitment to training and practice to become proficient at teaching VTS. Our professional staff and volunteers have worked

hard to achieve the level of expertise required to be effective facilitators, but the learning is fun and motivating.

We get together regularly for VTS soirees. Imagine a group of people sipping wine while discussing a replica of a Norman Rockwell painting. The discussion is lively, the learning is genuine, and the atmosphere is really fun.

At the Holter Museum of Art, we strive to provide authentic and fun experiences for groups that come to the museum for docent-led tours. We help create an environment that helps students feel comfortable in museums and give them tools that support their classroom learning and (dare I say) life skills. VTS is an integral part of our program that helps us achieve our goals.

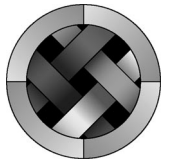
I remember my classroom teaching days and trying to get students to expand on their writing or thinking and how difficult it was at times to get them to elaborate on their ideas. I wish I had known about VTS back then!

It's exciting and almost magical to see them apply their VTS experience to other areas of learning. Teachers tell me that they have seen their students' writing improve after several sessions of VTS.

These are things that keep me motivated about this method of teaching. I guarantee that after a VTS discussion you will always remember the piece of artwork you discussed. That's an added bonus!

Oh, what floor are we on?

You can find out more about VTS
www.vtshome.org.



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T.E.A. grants available

The Montana Arts Council continues to offer Teacher Exploration of the Arts (TEA) grants. This program is for elementary classroom teachers or K-8 teachers with an elementary endorsement, who are asked to teach visual art or music and do not have a background in that subject, and wish to work one-on-one with a professional working artist in order to develop skills in a particular artistic discipline.

Disciplines include dance, literary arts, media arts, music, theatre and visual arts.

For more information, go to art.mt.gov/schools/schools_tea.asp.

THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE

Express to Speak: Youth program fosters self-expression

Tahj Kjelland grew up with music — his mother, Mary Place, is a Missoula musical fixture — and most of his first memories center around music and performance. From these musical beginnings Tahj has developed an exciting new program called Express to Speak, to help youth find their individual voices in an increasingly complex world.

Tahj says that the program is not just about music; it's also about social justice, a deep concern of his own since he was a teenager and trying to find his own way in the world. In his own development as a performer, he experimented with mixing music and poetry in ways that emphasized self-empowerment and ethical behavior.

"The whole time I was still working with words," he says. "I was very attuned to injustice and I was experimenting with ways to express my concerns." He began developing the blueprint for what would later become Express to Speak while leading poetry workshops at the Boys and Girls Club in Missoula, an organization his mother ran at the time.

Tahj explains his early process: "First we'd write. Then we'd go out onto Higgins Avenue and I'd get the kids to perform on the street corner — performing for the cars, just to get them over their fears."

Five years later, he is fine tuning the program, working with the group Arising Nation, a Native American spoken word/youth empowerment group based in Fort Peck. "There's a strong emphasis on critical thinking and reflection," he says. "If youth know who they are, if they're more comfortable in their skin, then I believe they'll be more successful throughout life. Combining the skills involved in writing and performing can help



Tahj Kjelland performs at a poetry slam.
(Photo courtesy of Humanities Montana)

with both the thinking/feeling part and the confidence part."

Express to Speak programs continue to evolve; each is especially tailored to the group's interests and needs, however the basic format follows several steps. "I start out performing something with a beat, loud, kind of shocking, just to wake the kids up, startle them. Then I lead a brainstorming session where I help them start to free associate, get over the fear of judgment, asking them to throw words out there while I write them down as fast as I can."

Tahj then takes the results and improvises a piece using the storm of words. "I describe it to them as a smoothie. Who doesn't like a smoothie? I blend up the words like they were bananas and blueberries and strawberries and we see what it tastes like."

The final steps help the kids internalize the public "brainstorming" and "smoothie" processes, and connect the group of words to their own experiences.

"Instead of shouting out words I have them write down their own storm of words on a piece of paper, no thinking, just letting the unconscious mind come out. Then they're asked to take those words and turn them into any sort of piece they want. And finally I get them to perform what they've created. Almost all of them will perform at least a little bit."

In the past year Tahj has given his program at a number of schools and worked with a variety of youth programs including, in Missoula, Willard Alternative High School, Hellgate High School, Big Sky High School, and Washington Middle School. He's also traveling as much as he can across the state, providing workshops in Fort Peck High School, Bitterroot Youth Homes, Custer County High School in Miles City, Simms High School, and Two Eagle River School in Pablo.

Express to Speak is available through the Humanities Montana Speakers in the Schools program, a program that has allowed Tahj to present workshops to over 1,000 school-aged kids so far, and perform for over 3,000. He's finishing a degree in social work at The University of Montana and considering pursuing a graduate degree in the field.

Express to Speak is on its way to non-profit status and greater exposure around the state. In the future, Tahj hopes to expand the program by training youth leaders in Express to Speak facilitation. In the meantime, teachers and others interested in the workshops can find more information about Humanities Montana's Speakers in the Schools program at www.humanitiesmontana.org.

For more information on Express to Speak check out the Facebook page: www.facebook.com/pages/Express-To-Speak/544901178870222?ref=ts

Or visit the program description on the Humanities Montana site: www.humanitiesmontana.org/programs/mtconversations/speakers/cat_kjelland_expresstospeak.php?cat=sis